Castro, Would be Napoleon

"HE WAS THE FIRST MAN IN THE ENEMY'S TRENCHES"

CASTRO CARRIED INTO CARACAS ON A STRETCHER AT THE HEAD OF HIS VICTORIOUS ARMY

BY WILLIAM THORP.

At a ball in the city of Caracas two Decembers ago an undersized, swarthy, keen-eyed Venezuelan, whose face plainly showed his Indian blood, took a tall, beautiful American woman out on to the piazza to enjoy the cool tropic night after the heat of the ball room. The woman was chatting brightly about social trifles, but the man did not listen. His thoughts were far away. Suddenly he spoke in upon her talk.

"Do you see that star?" he asked, pointing to one of the fixed stars which twinkled brightly in the soft, velvety sky. "That is my star. When that star falls, I shall fall. Not before."

That man was Cipriano Castro, president of Venezuela. The woman was Mrs. Herbert Bowen, wife of the American minister to Venezuela.

At that time England, Germany and Italy were blockading Venezuela's coasts and threatening to land troops and seize the custom houses. Three-fourths of the country was in the hands of the revolutionists, who sought to overthrow Castro. Colombia was preparing to help them by invading Venezuela from the west. Nine men out of every ten in Caracas cursed Castro, under their breath, as the evil genius of his country. It seemed impossible that he could remain in power another month, so thick were the troubles and perils which surrounded him.

Castro did not worry. Like Napoleon, he believed in his star. He told people that he was going to be another Napoleon—of whom, by the way, he is always fond of reading and talking.

"Like Napoleon," he once said to the writer, when he was Castro's guest at La Victoria, "I am the Man of Destiny. Yes," he repeated, evidently pleased by the phase, "I am the Man of Destiny for this part of the world. Does not my career show that?"

No wonder Castro, the Conqueror thinks himself another Napoleon, and believes in his star; he has never known defeat. Fighting, time after time, against enormous odds, he has always won.

Life in some of the South American republics makes fiction seem gray and dull. What could be more fantastic than for a peasant, a mere muleteer living "at the back of beyond" in the Andes, to throw down his whip and his hoe, and say to his mates:

"Come along, boys! I'm sick of this. I'm going to be president, and you shall be generals and cabinet ministers!"

That is precisely what Cipriano Castro did, and he carried out his promise. For a parallel one must go back to Tamburlaine, the Ceythian shepherd, who became a world conqueror.

The story of that dash from the Andes to Caracas, as the writer has heard it from Castro himself and from the men who were with him, is thrilling.

With a mere handful of men—twenty, thirty, perhaps sixty—he started a local revolution. Defeating with ease bodies of troops outnumbering his own by ten to one, he captured here a village and there a town, until a large slice of the republic was in his hands, and the government at Caracas began to regard him as a serious proposition.

While that government frittered away time in the Latin-American way, Castro followed his star without hesitating a moment. Like all good generals, he appreciates the value of time; he does not believe in "manana" when there is work to be done. His army grew like a snowball rolling down hill, with each new victory, and before the government had made up its mind what to do he was within striking distance of Caracas.

At that critical moment he fell from his horse and broke his leg, but the accident did not tame his fiery spirit. From his sick bed he directed his troops; from his sick bed he bought over the general commanding the government army. The president, Senor Andrade, fled the country, and Castro, suffering agonies from a badly set fracture, but indomitable as ever, was carried into Caracas on a stretcher at the head of his victorious army. And so he made himself president.

Today Castro rules with a rod of iron. He is the only man who counts in Venezuela, because of his immense self-confidence, his energy, and his dash. The last mentioned quality is the most valuable of all in a Latin-American country. Bravery is a common attribute among the Venezuelans; but the Anglo-Saxon quality of dash is rarely found south of Texas.

The revolutionist generals were always waiting for reinforcements or more ammunition; they were always going to do something manana." Meanwhile, Castro, laboring under immense disadvantages, fighting against desperate odds, did something today, until eventually he crushed them.

The writer asked Castro once: "How was it that you conquered in that great five-day battle at La Victoria, the turning point of the revolution? By all the rules of war, you ought to have been easily beaten."

"I won," replied Castro, smiling sardonically, "because the god of battles fought upon my side, and because my opponents were damned fools."

He paused a moment, thinking about the battle, and went on: "I never could have won if my enemies had possessed the least military ability. They outnumbered my troops more than three to one, and they were much better supplied with ammunition than I was.

"Look at this map for a moment. This is where I was, holding a very strong position. If they had placed a small body of troops here, and a second here, and a third here, they would have surrounded me; and then their main body could have marched on and taken Caracas without opposition.

"Instead of doing that, they wasted their energy and their men by making a lot of stupid frontal attacks on my strong position. They fired away all their ammunition uselessly, and then, when my fresh supplies came, I simply led my men right at their center, and there was nothing for them to do but to retreat as quickly as they could. Do you wonder that I hold them cheaply—that I am confident of my ability to crush them, or any others like them?"

But Castro's officers say that the battle was won through his courage and generalship, not through the folly of the other side.

When all seemed blackest, when his men were faling all around him like ninepins, and defeat was imminent, Castro caught up a rifle and dashed from the trenches up the mountain side toward the heart of the enemy's position, yelling to his men to follow him. The shock of that wild charge was irresistible. Scores of men were shot down as they clambered up the mountain, but with Castro leading none could turn back. He was the first man in the enemy's trenches, raging among their gunners like a Viking of old. The position was captured and the battle won by sheer force of his magnetic courage.

Castro's power rests upon his strength of character and the loyalty of his friends—not upon any star. Former presidents of Venezuela have fallen through the treachery of men whom they trusted and placed in high positions. Castro has surrounded himself by his fellow Andinos—men whom he has known from boyhood, men who were among "the conquering sixty," as they are called in Caracas—the sixty with whom he started his fight for the presidency.

The average Venezuelan is apt to be treacherous when placed in a position of trust; but the Andino is famous throughout Venezuela for his loyalty. The Sikh is not truer to his salt, the Scottish Highlander is not more clannish.

Castro knows this. He is true to his old friends, and they are true to him. He has made them generals and cabinet ministers, as he promised to do when he enlisted them in "the conquering sixty," and they repay him by such faithful service as no Venezuelan president has had before. Thus he is able to maintain his power, although he is the best-hated man in Venezuela.

Wherever one goes in Caracas—in club, in cafe, in ball room, in hotel—one hears curses, "not loud, but deep," of Castro. But the cursers look carefully around to see that no Andino officer is within hearing. They hate Castro and his Andinos intensely, but they fear them more.

It is not easy to form an estimate of Castro's character. He is many-sided. The more one sees of him the harder it becomes to judge.

Readers of "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" will remember the three Johns—the John known to himself, the John known to other people, and the John only known to his Maker. There are more than three Castros. The most obvious Castro is Castro, the Conqueror, the warrior who has faced his foes and backed his friends, the ruler who has pillaged merchants, ruined trade, reduced a large part of his country to a desert, who has been responsible for the death of thousands of men, and brought upon Venezuela the scorn of the world and the wrath of the great powers. This Castro is a tyrant.

But there is also Castro the Democrat, accessible to the meanest of his people, anxious to provide for their enjoyment such acceptable festivities as bullfights, band concerts in the "plaza," picnics and dances. This Castro is a kind of Venezuelan "Big Bill" Devery, who likes nothing better than "blowing" everybody in sight. The writer has seen him dancing and drinking beer with peasants at a picnic, mingling affably with the crowds who promenade in the "plazas" of La Victoria and Caracas in the evening, and suddenly inviting everybody in the square to come up to the palace and enjoy an impromptu dance.

When he returned to Caracas from the "crowning glory" of La Victoria, he kept open house at Miraflores Palace. Anybody, down to the lowest beggar, who cared to walk in, could swim in champagne and "aguadiente," if he chose. Half Caracas suffered from a headache afterwards.

No ruler on earth is more accessible than Castro. He has made hundreds of bitter personal enemies, as well as thousands of political ones, but he never hedges himself about with guards or secret service agents. Anybody can walk straight into the "patio" of his palace, without challenge. Likely enough, Castro will be standing there, chatting to his officers and casual visitors; or, perhaps, playing billiards or feeding his numerous pet birds.

It is no breach of Venezuelan etiquette to go straight up and talk to him. He is always affable and courteous, whether the visitor be a foreign minister or merely an itinerant pedlar trying to sell books or boot laces.

On one of the most critical days of the recent international blockade several persons were at the palace waiting to see Castro.

He came into the "patio" with several of his ministers, crossed over to them, and said:

"Will you kindly wait a little longer? Some important cablegrams have come from Washington and we have to hold a meeting of the cabinet to consider them."

He passed, with his ministers, into the reception room, at the doorway of which the visitors were sitting, and the cabinet sat round in a circle for the conference. Naturally, the visitors rose to go; but Castro jumped up and politely begged them not to disturb themselves—the conference would soon be finished!

Before he sat down again a beggar boy, who was lounging in the "patio," "butted in" to the cabinet circle and asked the president of his republic to buy some knitted socks. Castro laughed, chaffed him and gave him a dollar. Then the cabinet council went on, within earshot of a score of loungers.

Such is the way in which public affairs are transacted in Venezuela.

What else can be expected when one of the country's principal officials is Castro's old barber from the Andes? He still shaves the president when he has leisure from his other duties as a gengral and a statesman.

Castro the tyrant and Castro the democrat have each his good points, but there is also Castro the dreamer, best known to himself, who is full of national pride and patriotic fervor, who knows the possibilities of Venezuela and sees visions of her as a great world power, bound in close alliance with the other American states to resist the aggression of Europe.

The writer had a glimpse of this Castro two years ago at La Victoria, when he unfolded a scheme for a Pan-American defensive alliance against Europe, which he evidently considered to be within the realm of practical politics.

This Castro has Napoleonic ambitions which are fed by a crowd of flatterers who tell him that he is the greatest South American general since Bolivar. Looking back on his career of persistent victory, he believes them and plans for the conquest of Colombia and the control of the Panama canal situation. He wants to be to South America what Napoleon was to Europe.

(Copyright, 1904, by William Thorp.)

Hard on the Doctors.

(Boston Post.)

Senator Sullivan of New York was recently a guest at a banquet of homeopathic physicians. During the evening the usual toasts were drunk. To the health of "the ladies," of "the president," of "Hahnemann, the father of homeopathy," and many other persons and subjects glasses were drained and then the toastmaster remarked that Senator Sullivan had not yet responded to a toast.

"Senator Sullivan," he said, rising, "has not yet been heard from. He will now kindly propose a health."

The senator arose and beamed upon the assemblage of physicians.

"I propose," he said, "the health of the sick."